Transitioning Special Education Self-contained Special Units into Learning Support Bases for Inclusion: The case of Zanzibar Primary Schools

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Abstract

Inclusive education is a globally accepted approach that aims to provide equal opportunities to all learners, regardless of their differences. In the 1990s, the Zanzibar Ministry of Education introduced special education units for children with disabilities attached to some primary schools. However, in 2004, the role of these special units had to change gradually. This study investigates the process of changing the role of the special units, the achievements made by the units in supporting the inclusion of learners with special education needs into regular classrooms, and the challenges they face. The research collected data through documentary review and semi-structured interviews with ten special education teachers working in the special units, ten regular schoolteachers, and a focused group discussion with the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training officers responsible for promoting inclusive education. The study revealed mixed results regarding the role of the special units in promoting inclusive education in Zanzibar. The units were used as preparatory classes before some pupils with disabilities were included in regular classrooms. However, the units lacked inclusive transition into regular classrooms. Furthermore, there was a lack of coordination and collaboration between the teachers of the special units and those from the regular classrooms in implementing inclusive education. The study recommends better utilization of the special units for promoting inclusive education in the research context and similar contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study highlights the need for collaboration between special education teachers and regular classroom teachers to ensure that all learners have equal opportunities to achieve their full potential.

Keywords: inclusive education; special units; regular classrooms; teachers; Zanzibar; Tanzania.

Introduction

The right of every child to an education is universal and extends to all, including children with disabilities or special educational needs. It is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD [2006]) which emphasize the right of all children with disabilities to be included in the general education systems and to receive the individual support they require to enable them to reach their full potential. This right is also proclaimed in various significant international declarations, such as the 1990 World Declaration for Education for All (United Nations, 1990), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) and the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2016). Research on the appropriate settings for educating children with disabilities or special educational needs is ongoing (Greenstein, 2014; Landor, & Perepa, 2017; White et al., 2018). For example, in England, around 40% of children categorized as having special educational needs (SEN) are educated in segregated settings (Greenstein, 2014). According to research, educating children with disabilities in separate settings presents several challenges (Reid et al., 2004; Mooney et al., 2005). A meta-analysis conducted by Reid et al. (2004) revealed that students with disabilities tend to display high rates of problem behavior and lower academic achievement than students without disabilities. The overall effect size was -0.64, indicating significant deficits in academic achievement for students with disabilities. This suggests that segregating students with disabilities may hinder their academic progress and limit their opportunities for future success. Similarly, Mooney et al. (2005) reviewed self-management interventions that aimed to improve academic outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. They found that self-monitoring interventions had a significant positive impact on academic performance. The overall mean effect size across these studies was 1.80, indicating large and educationally meaningful effects. This implies that providing inclusive educational environments and effective interventions can improve academic outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. This view is in line with United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) call to educate all children in their neighbourhood schools regardless of any differences such as language, culture, ability, or disability (UNESCO, 1994):

'The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of their difficulties or differences. Inclusive schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use, and partnerships with their communities.' (UNESCO 1994 p.11, Salamanca Framework for Action)

UNESCO suggests that when it is inappropriate for some children to study in inclusive classrooms, they could be in segregated schools or classrooms as a last resort, but that placement should be temporary. Children with disabilities are more likely to never enrol in school or drop out earlier than their peers without disabilities (Yusuph & Hussein, 2022) due to the lack of training among teachers on special needs communication, such as Braille and sign language. With the limited availability of general support systems, children with disabilities face compounded challenges including limited preparation of teachers to teach in inclusive settings (Reyes et al., 2017; Somma, 2020). Also, children with disabilities have lower primary and secondary education completion rates than children without disabilities (Yusuph & Hussein, 2022). While in some countries, children with disabilities are educated in segregated settings, article 24 of the UNCRPD urges member states to adopt inclusive education at all levels instead of segregating learners in terms of their abilities or disabilities, color, race, or religion (United Nations, 2006):

States … recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education [and] shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to the full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and human diversity … enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society (United Nations, 2006).

Inclusive Education in Tanzania

Like many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, formal education for children with SEN and/ or disabilities in Tanzania before the proclamation of the Salamanca statement and framework for action (UNESCO, 1994) was mostly through segregated settings either in special schools or in integrated schools which would have one or more rooms for children with

disabilities attached within the school compound. For example, in mainland Tanzania, schools for children with disabilities include Makalala Integrated Primary School (Iringa Region), Longido Integrated Primary School (Arusha Region), Rutengano School (Mbeya Region) and Misungwi Integrated Primary School (Mwanza Region) (Tungaraza, 2018).

For many years, Zanzibar, which is a semi-autonomous part of Tanzania, did not have public special schools for children with disabilities at any level. Such children have been educated in special education units integrated into regular primary schools or in regular schools alongside their peers without disabilities. However, in 2022 the Zanzibar government began the construction of two boarding schools that will enrol students with hearing impairments and those with visual impairments. These schools are designed to also enrol other students without disabilities from the neighbouring areas. The Salamanca Statement directs governments not to place children in special schools - or special classes or sections within a school permanently. Special classes or special units are to be recommended:

> …only in those infrequent cases where it is clearly demonstrated that
> education in regular classrooms is incapable of meeting a child's
> educational or social needs or when it is required for the welfare of the child
> or that of other children. (UNESCO, 1994 p.12).

Research shows that transitioning from segregated into inclusive settings for learners with disabilities and/or special educational needs requires careful planning, a gradual implementation plan, close monitoring, and modifying support from various educational stakeholders (Avramidis et al., 2002).

This paper focuses on analyzing how the changing role of special education units for children with disabilities in promoting inclusive education is taking place. It addresses the achievements, the process of turning the units to serve all learners in line with inclusive education, and describes the challenges faced in the process. In the present study, inclusive education is conceptualized as a continuous process of identifying and removing barriers to the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners regardless of their differences (Ainscow et al., 2006; Ainscow, 2020; Juma, & Lehtomäki, 2016). We draw on the data collected from eight primary schools in Zanzibar—a semi-autonomous archipelago of the United Republic of Tanzania off the eastern African coast. We aimed to investigate the structure and functions of the special units in the Zanzibar education system, the challenges facing the units, and the need to

transform these units into learning support bases (LSBs). The LSBs are expected to promote inclusion by providing learning support, guidance, and assistance to all children rather than just those with disabilities. So far, little is scientifically known about whether these units support learners enrolled in general schools. Neither is there evidence on how these units are playing their expected role of supporting learners enrolled in general schools. Thus, the paper analyses the process of turning the special units for children with disabilities into LSBs for supporting inclusion. We give an overview of the enrolment of children with disabilities in Zanzibar schools, followed by a description of the special units for children with disabilities and the inclusive special education model. We present, analyze, and discuss the findings and recommend the way forward.

Special Units for Children with Disabilities

Special units in this study refer to the rooms usually attached to mainstream schools and have been purpose-built or allocated for children with disabilities. In Zanzibar, they were established and integrated into primary schools in the 1990s (Juma et al., 2017). The aim was to provide children with disabilities with their right to education like all other children. However, because of the general education teachers' lack of knowledge and skills, the Ministry responsible for education decided that these children should be educated in separate classroom settings designated for children with special educational needs. Most of these special units are in urban or semi-urban areas close to the major towns in Zanzibar. However, data from the interviews with headteachers of the schools with special units revealed that some head teachers resisted the integration of special units in the rural areas like Paje (South region- Unguja and Konde (North region-Pemba) in the mid-1990s. These headteachers believed that children with disabilities were uneducable as the schools did not have staff who specialized in teaching children with special educational needs. In addition, the headteachers claimed they did not have enough rooms to accommodate all pupils in their schools. So, they would not be ready to spare a room for only a few children (with disabilities) at the expense of other children (without disabilities). Since then, there have been no attempts to establish these units in rural schools. Table 1 summarises information about these special units. Table 1 shows that the total number of teachers is 36 in all the nine units (32 females; 4 males). Only five are trained as special education teachers, and only 14 are trained in inclusive education. Therefore, only 52 percent of the teachers are trained in special or inclusive education.

Inclusive Special Education Model

When students are enrolled in the special units in Zanzibar integrated schools, they have all their learning activities in the special units and do not interact with pupils in mainstream classrooms for academic issues. However, the findings from interviews with teachers from the special units and the general schools indicate some interaction between the students from the special units and their peers from the mainstream classrooms before and during the morning assembly and break times. Whilst it is generally agreed that the fundamental principle of inclusive education is that all children should have an opportunity to study together in inclusive schools without discrimination or segregation, the Zanzibar inclusive education model is not that of 'full inclusion', rather it is what Hornby (2012, 2015, 2021) describes as inclusive special education. Hornby (2012, p. 8) refers to *inclusive special education* 'with most children in mainstream classrooms and a small number in special classes or units within or attached to the school.'

An interview conducted by the first author with the MoEVT officers responsible for promoting inclusive education revealed that special units will continue to exist within some schools and enrol students with special needs if necessary, including those with severe and complex disabilities. In the Zanzibar context, a special unit is a classroom or a set of facilities in a regular school set aside for use in special education services. Within these special units, learners with severe disabilities or challenges can receive support and teaching within a smaller group with a specially trained teacher who can adapt activities to learners' individual needs. Thus, on the one hand, the special units are expected to provide support to the learners, but on the other hand, over time, they will develop a new purpose, acting as resources to support the specialist needs of learners in inclusive settings. The Zanzibar inclusive education model seems to have gradually moved from a ''moderate'' to a ''universalist'' perspective. Cigman (2007) described the inclusive moderate perspective as including the use of special schools for children who require it, while the universalist perspective, on the other hand, views the use of special schools or special units as incompatible with the policy of full inclusion. Thus, the study inquires what challenges exist in making the special units change their role of providing specialist support to children with disabilities into serving as resource rooms or learning support bases that cater to the needs of all learners and not just those with disabilities.

Table 1

Special units for children with disabilities in Zanzibar by December 2020

Name of School	Type of Disability	Number of Teachers		Number of pupils		Special Education Teachers		Level of Special Education Training			Level of Inclusive Education Training		
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	M	Cert.	Dipl.	Bach.	Cert.	Dipl.	Bach.
1. Primary School B	Intellectual	3	1	8	24	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
2. Primary School C	Intellectual	2	1	7	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3. Primary School D	Intellectual	3	1	10	9	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
4. Primary School A	Intellectual	2	0	8	6	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
5. Primary School A	Visual	4	0	8	6	2	0	1	0	1	2	0	0
6. Primary School H	Hearing	8	0	30	21	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0
8. Primary School G	Intellectual	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
9. Primary School F	Intellectual	0	1	4	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total		**32**	**4**	**80**	**93**	**3**	**2**	**2**	**1**	**2**	**12**	**1**	**1**

Source: Inclusive Education and Skills Unit (2020)   Cert.=Certificate; Dipl.=Diploma; Bach. =Bachelors.

Methodology

Study Design

The study utilized a qualitative research approach to elicit comprehensive opinions directly from the participants. Therefore, to achieve an in-depth understanding of how the respondents perceived the role and challenges of the special units as well as the need for the units to be used as learning support bases in promoting inclusion, we adopted a qualitative design informed by interpretive/constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2009; Hartas, 2010; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). The qualitative research paradigm seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from the research participants in their work world. The constructivist paradigm holds that reality is created through the interaction between the investigator (the researcher) and

the respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Creswell, 2007). It views reality as multiple and produced through a hermeneutical/dialectical process.

Participants

Eight integrated schools (schools with special units for children with disabilities) were purposefully selected for the present study (see Table 2). These schools were Primary School A (1 unit), Primary School B (2 units), Primary School C (1 unit), Primary School D (1 unit), Primary School Primary School E (1 unit) Primary School F (1 unit), and Primary School H (1 unit). A total of 12 teachers (three males and nine females) teaching in the special units were selected using the convenience sampling technique. In addition, using a convenient sampling technique, we selected eight teachers (five females and three males; one from each school) from the same schools but among those not teaching in the special units. During the fieldwork, we selected only those teachers who had time for the interview and were willing to participate. To collect data from teachers who were not available in their schools, we conducted telephone interviews with them from their homes. Additionally, we held a focus group discussion (FGD) with five Inclusive Education and Life Skills (IELS)Unit officers from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT), consisting of one male and four females. During the FGD, we designated one person as a facilitator while the other took notes using a notebook and pen to record the crucial points discussed.

Table 2

Distribution of the study participants and tools used during data collection

	Location	No. of participants	Instruments
1	Primary School A	2 females	Interview
2	Primary School B	1 male 1 female	interview
3	Primary School C	2 males, 2 females	FGD
4	Primary School D	3 females, 1 male	FGD
5	Primary School E	1 female	interview
6	Primary School F *	2 males, 2 females	FGD
7	Primary School G *	2 females	interview
8	Primary School H	2 females	interview
9	IELS Unit	4 females, 1 male	FGD
	TOTAL 25		

*These units enrol learners with a developmental disability and any other type of disability.

Procedure

We collected data through semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews with the teachers from the eight participating schools. All the interviews were conducted in Kiswahili, the language all interviewees felt comfortable using to express themselves freely. We used telephone interviews in Primary Schools C, E, and F; in the remaining five schools, we used face-to-face interviews. We had to use telephone interviews because of the convenience of the respondents, who could not be available when we wanted to go to their locations. We opted for semi-structured interviews because of the use of predetermined questions that would allow us to ensure that we obtained data responding to our research questions (Hobson & Townsend, 2010). One interview, which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, was conducted from each school. The interview schedule consisted of a set of ten questions. These questions explored the way the special units currently operate and the special units' teachers' understanding of the new role of the special units under an inclusive education system.

Question number one seeks to gather detailed information on each special unit. It explores the special units' background, nature, and main functions. Questions two to four were set to determine the challenges, success, knowledge, skills, and attitudes obtained from each special unit. The questions further explored techniques teachers use to teach learners with disabilities in the units. Question number five investigated the curriculum used (also how the learners in each special unit are taught and the duration the learners spend in the units before being transferred to the mainstream classes). Questions number six up to number ten intensively sought to ask about the teachers' understanding of the concept of inclusive education and the move from an integrated education system into an inclusive education system. The questions further sought to explore the challenges and success obtained within the inclusive education system for learners with disabilities. The questions also sought to understand the special unit teachers' and the mainstream teachers' roles when the learners are transferred into the mainstream classes and what happens after these learners have been shifted into the mainstream classes. Both the first and second authors conducted the one-to-one interviews with the special unit teachers separately. Thus, each author interviewed different teachers. The interviews lasted between 15 and 20 minutes and were completed on the same day. Some of the teachers did not want to be voice recorded and hence we respected their decision and used pen and paper to make some notes.

The FGD guide for special units' teachers consisted of the same questions we used in the interview schedule. There were two FGD groups consisting of 6 teachers each. To collect data from the IELS unit officers, we used an FGD guide with five questions. There was one FGD group that consisted of 5 members. The questions sought to explore the role of the IELS Unit in supporting the special units, how often the IELS Unit officers visit the special units, what the challenges are facing the special units, the MoEVT's future to improve practice in the special units, and whether the number of the special units will be increased. The FGD lasted 75 minutes.

Permission to collect data was sought from the head teachers at each school. Participants were given verbal information about the purpose of the study. After understanding the object of the study, the participants willingly agreed to participate. They verbally consented to tape-record the data and use it for academic presentation and publication. The research informants were assured confidentiality of the data generated from the interviews and FGDs. Hence, informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity issues were addressed. To maintain the confidentiality of the respondents and their schools, we have avoided using the participants' names and mentioning the actual names of the schools. We have masked the names of the schools by using letters after 'Primary school'. For example, we refer to the schools as Primary School 'A', Primary School 'B', and Primary School 'C' instead of the actual names of the schools.

Data Analysis

A thematic content analysis using guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Saldaña (2016) was made to extract key messages from the interview and FGD data. We both thoroughly read and compared our field notes and listened to the tape-recorded data several times to become familiar with our data. However, from the recorded interviews and FGD, we transcribed only the pieces we found relevant to our research questions. We coded the data using various Microsoft Word processing tools like font color, text highlight, italics, bolding, and shading.

Data were verified using Guba and Lincoln's (1989) construct of trustworthiness (thoroughly explaining methodology and data triangulation). We triangulated the interview and FGD data with the field notes we kept during and after the fieldwork. We then shared, compared, and discussed the key points noted in our notebooks. To verify the quotes, we used in this study, we carefully listened to the audiotapes several times to ensure that the quotes represent the words the respondents uttered. To validate our study findings, we organized a one-day feedback meeting

with the study participants and shared the summary of our findings and recommendations with them.

Results

The analysis of the data generated themes that we broke down into three sub-themes, namely (i) Achievements of the special units, (ii) Turning special units into resource rooms, and (iii) Challenges facing special units in promoting inclusion. We use the three sub-themes to present the findings:

Achievements in the Special Units

Data in the FGD and interviews with the teachers have shown that there has been an increase of awareness among community members, including parents, teachers, students, and various educational stakeholders, towards the educational rights of all children because of the increased number of children with disabilities in the schools.

> 'Because some of the parents or guardians used to hide their children
> with disabilities, but now that has somewhat changed' (a special unit
> teacher)

The study participants reported that the units have effectively supported learners with special educational needs and helped develop their personal and social skills. A primary school teacher from Primary School B stated that although not all students continued to higher levels of education, most of them acquired essential life skills that enabled them to manage their hygiene and assist their parents with domestic chores.

Moreover, the teachers in the study believe that the units have contributed to the success of some students with disabilities who had been studying in special classes. The teachers at Primary School A pointed out that some of their students with disabilities successfully participated in national and international competitions, including the Special Olympics. These impressive achievements demonstrate that children with disabilities can achieve great things. One of the teachers said,

> 'We are proud of them here. Some of our students represented Zanzibar
> in the Special Olympics in 1999, 2005, and 2009. This is a great
> achievement for us.'

Turning Special Units into Learning Support Bases

Data from The IELS Unit revealed that the special education units are now transitioning into resource rooms, which can be used to provide more support to learners in the special units and learners from the mainstream classes. Thus, the special units are now expected to work as preparatory, whereby the learners who show some improvement in learning are shifted into the mainstream classes. In addition, the units are also being prepared to work as 'resource rooms', which can provide support to any learner with additional support needs and not just those with disabilities. Through support from UNICEF, MoEVT has started improving two of the nine special units by constructing 'resource rooms', one at Primary School B and the other at Primary School G. Data collected from the integrated schools show that 29 learners from all nine special units were transferred to mainstream classrooms between 2015 and 2018 (see Table 2). These included four children with visual impairments, 13 children with intellectual impairment, five children with physical disabilities, four children with low vision, and three children with multiple disabilities who were moved from the self-contained special units into the mainstream classrooms. Data collected from the special units revealed that the number of students transferred into the mainstream classrooms from the special units between 2015 and 2018 was 29 (6 females and 23 males). The head teachers confirmed the data when the authors wanted to crosscheck the data.

However, some children (about 10) were either returned to the special units or dropped out of the school after being transferred into the mainstream classrooms, as claimed by a teacher from Primary School B:

> 'Sometimes, the students whom we have transferred from the special units to the mainstream classrooms, return to us.'

When asked about the possible reasons for this situation, the teacher commented:

> 'Well, I think it's because, in the special units, they have closer support and care than in the mainstream classes. There are many children in the mainstream classes. Also, in the special units, they used to be given meals during break times. In the mainstream classes, they do not get the meal'.

Challenges Facing Special Units in Promoting Inclusion

Several challenges facing the special units were identified by the study participants from both the FGDs and the interviews. The prominent ones were:

Poor Teacher-Parent Co-operation

Poor cooperation between parents and teachers who teach in the special units, especially for students with developmental disabilities, was among the challenges facing the special units. Data from the teacher interviews showed that some parents are not cooperative.

'They would not come to the meetings when we ask them to do so'. (a
special unit teacher)

At the School F special unit, it was reported that the parents are not cooperative enough with the special unit teachers, leading to the children not attending the unit regularly. Parents are not ready to send their children to and pick them up from the unit. It is only when their teachers can go to their homes to pick them up, go to school with them, and send them back home, as claimed by this teacher from Primary School F.

'One of our challenges here is that the parents do not have awareness, nor
do they cooperate to bring their children here at the special unit. Believe me,
for these children to attend here, I have to take the children from their homes
and return them home.'

Likewise, the findings revealed poor cooperation between teachers from the special units and those from the mainstream classes before and after the learners shifted to the mainstream classrooms. Also, there was significant evidence in the data that there is insufficient follow-up and support for the children transferred to the mainstream classrooms from the special units as lamented by this teacher.

'Once we transfer a child [to the mainstream classrooms, it's over.
Their teachers don't return to us, and we don't follow them up for
anything.' (A teacher from Primary School D)

Shortage of Skilled Human Resources Capable of Supporting Inclusive Transition

Data from the IELS Unit (see Table 1) indicate a total number of 36 teachers in all the nine special units (32F; 4M). Of these, only five are trained as special education teachers, and only two are trained in inclusive education. Thus, limited teachers capable of technically supporting learners with special educational needs are shifted from the special units into the mainstream classes. Most of the teachers who teach in the units have not been trained in special education. Nor have they been trained in inclusive education. However, at least one teacher in some units is trained in special education. Teachers at Primary School G special unit claim that

only one teacher received specialized training. Even worse, the teachers claimed that the authorities use the unit as a resting place for elderly teachers who are about to retire and those who are no longer capable of teaching because of illnesses:

> 'Actually, there are no specialized teachers here except for one teacher. Also, the bosses responsible for recruiting and transferring teachers tend to transfer the elderly and those no longer capable of teaching on medical grounds to the special units. When such teachers report here, they can't do anything. As you know dealing with these children is not a joke; sometimes, the children would suddenly run out of the classroom; you must catch them. We need energetic teachers, not those who are ill.'
>
> 'We have a shortage of teachers who have specialised in intellectual disabilities, only one teacher who studied inclusive education but not special education' (Primary School C).

Because of the limited capacity of the mainstream teachers to support the learners from the special units, it was also revealed that when some children are shifted into the regular classrooms, they drop out before completing the primary cycle (Standard VI):

> 'So most of them drop out before completing Primary school, they will just end up in Std IV, or V'. "In our school, about six children were shifted to the regular classrooms, and none of them completed the primary level; they all dropped out.' (a special unit teacher/Primary School C).

Sometimes, the general education teachers return the children from the special units to the mainstream classes because of the lack of capacity to support their learning, as seen from this teacher's comment.

> 'Sometimes teachers would return them, claiming that the child cannot support the child's learning.'

Negative Attitude

Negative attitudes of people towards learners with disabilities believe that they can learn nothing. For example, some parents who have a child with a developmental disability pay no attention to the learning development of their child, believing that nothing can be done to make their child learn.

'Some parents believe that it's just a waste of time to try to educate children with intellectual impairments.' Also, it was reported that some learners with specific learning difficulties are often labeled as 'lazy', 'slow learners,' and 'inclusive children' by their peers or even by some teachers.' (A teacher respondent, Primary School D)

Lack of Standard Guidelines for Teaching Learners in the Special Units

The data collected from the special units showed no concise guidelines for supporting children who are enrolled in the special units. However, some guidelines exist for supporting children with intellectual impairments at the Primary School G special unit. The special education teachers claimed that they had not received training on how to support inclusive education in mainstream classrooms, and hence,

'As far as I understand, no standards guide practice in the special units.'

(An IELS unit officer).

However, the data also revealed initiatives by the MoEVT to develop a syllabus for teaching learners with developmental disabilities. Also, there are plans to build a manual for teaching learners with visual impairments, textbooks for learners with visual impairments, and a syllabus for learners with developmental disabilities.

Poor Learning Environment

There are unfriendly learning environments in some special units like Primary Schools B and G. The school grounds at Primary School G are unsafe for children, especially those with visual or intellectual impairments. Often, such children stay in the special units with their peers with disabilities. When these children go outside their classrooms for games, they become excited to play outside. However, often, there are complaints of noise and disturbance from other students from the regular classrooms who might be having lessons in their classrooms. Some teachers have been complaining that they must keep the children with intellectual impairments inside the school because when they let them play outside, they would run away or cause disturbance to other students.

Limited Material Resources

Data have also revealed a shortage of teaching and learning resources for students with hearing disabilities and developmental disabilities. An observation in the special units revealed

the rooms are small and they lack basic learning materials and other resources, as lamented by this teacher:

> 'We generally face a shortage of teaching and learning materials in the units, though we sometimes try to make our own [materials] using locally available materials.' (A teacher from Primary School F)

Limited CPD Opportunities

Most teachers are not trained in specific learning difficulties, have inadequate training in special needs education, and cannot support a special unit. Limited on-the-job training for teachers who deal with students with disabilities was claimed by one among the participants that it is about ten years since they attended a workshop about minor repair of Braille machines.

Poor Record-keeping and Follow-up of the Special Units

Surprisingly, the MoEVT does not have records on the number of children who moved from the special units into regular classrooms. It was also surprising to observe that only in one unit (Primary School B) were there several students who moved from the units into the mainstream classroom without any cases of dropouts, unlike in other schools. This was the case even though almost all the reasons different schools gave did not affect this unit.

Nature of the Curriculum and Creation of IEPs in the Special Units

The study found that although most of the special units teach individual learners, the class has no universal content organization. For instance, units that deal with students with visual impairments follow the syllabus of mainstream schools. However, within the same class, each learner will have a different level of content taught (differentiation). The methods commonly used are participatory, where individual learners engage in task-oriented activities to help them learn a particular skill. Demonstrations, games, plays, songs, drama, and simulation are mostly used.

Duration of Stay in the Special Units

The duration for the learners to stay in special units varies from one special unit to another. In special units for learners with visual impairments units, the learners stay for a maximum of three years. In the units for children with developmental disabilities and hearing disabilities, children can stay up to ten years. However, how long a learner stays in the special unit depends on the ability of the individual learner to learn the needed skills. If they can learn

all the basic skills needed, they are shifted into the regular classes even if they have not completed one year in the special unit.

> 'We don't have a particular plan; a student may stay here [in the special unit'
>
> if they want to or when they are tired of waiting here. Students may also
>
> disappear for one year and then return.' (A teacher from Primary School G)

The teachers in the mainstream classrooms in these schools are not well prepared for inclusion since they are unwilling to welcome and support the children transferred to their classes from the special units. For example, they have not been taught how to create an IEP for children who may need it. In this case, the regular teachers may also need orientation to differentiation techniques and curriculum adaptation. These views related to the unpreparedness of the teachers for inclusion are like those found by Lehtomäki et al. (2014).

Lack of a Comprehensive, Inclusive Transitional Plan

The data from the special units indicate no comprehensive gradual transition plan from the special units into the general education classrooms. Children stay in the special units for many years and are suddenly moved to a new environment without being prepared for the change. This is a challenge for learners such as those on the autism spectrum or those with intellectual disabilities.

Some children would drop out of school after being shifted to mainstream classrooms because they would no longer be served breakfast as they used to when they were in the special units. If the children in the mainstream classes are in the morning shift (07:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.), they can still get breakfast if they go to the unit, but the challenge is if the mainstream classes are in the afternoon (12:30 p.m.-5:45 p.m.) shift, there will be no meals for these children as the units operate do not operate in the afternoons.

Some children opted to drop out of school when they were moved into the regular classrooms because of poor treatment by the regular teachers. They feel that they are missing the love and close support they used to receive from their special education teachers. There are no free meals in the regular classrooms, even though they can go and have meals. The problem is when the shift changes in the traditional classrooms. As the special education units operate only in the morning shift, the children cannot see the special education teachers, nor can they enjoy the free meal services from the special units because they are closed in the afternoons. Two units reported that once a student was moved into a regular classroom but did not stay, they opted to

drop out of school and the unit. There are no clear guidelines for transitioning from the special units into the regular classrooms. Special unit teachers would transfer the children when they felt they should. The remaining students in the units also refused to be shifted to the regular classroom. One of the reasons was the age difference: Thus, teachers in mainstream classrooms are generally reported to be unwilling to accept children with disabilities into their large classes and do not have a welcoming attitude towards them. It was also reported during the fieldwork that some students drop out after being shifted to the mainstream classrooms. A special unit teacher explained that:

> "there are some students that we send to the regular classes, but once they get there, the teachers do not have time to support them because of large class sizes. These students feel they are neglected and not taken care of. The students finally stop coming and drop out of school altogether." A special unit teacher.

Creating an Individual Education Plan

It was surprising to find out that Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) are rarely created in the special units, and when they are, they are usually not reviewed. The teachers in some of the special units have IEP files for their pupils, but in some special units, no IEPs were found. Even in those special units where IEPs were found, there was no evidence of IEP teams or the involvement of other persons other than teachers in creating the IEPs. The situation we found in the surveyed special units seems to suggest little parental engagement about their children's needs and support. The parents of the children with disabilities rarely have an opportunity to participate in IEP team meetings. Furthermore, the IELS Unit's follow-up is somewhat sporadic. Teachers in the special units claimed that the technical support they receive from the IELS Unit is irregular and inadequate.

Discussion

The discussion of the presented findings addresses the three themes: achievements in the special units, turning the special units into resource rooms and challenges in the special units for students with special educational needs.

Data from the IELS Unit and the schools have shown that the special units are used as preparatory classes for some children with disabilities before they can be shifted to mainstream classes. This is a crucial achievement towards inclusion because the special units may be a source

of segregation if they are used to separate children with disabilities or children with trouble learning from mainstream classrooms. Several studies about the state of education for students with disabilities in Tanzania and Kenya have also noted some achievements in such units (UNICEF, 2013; UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO, 2020) despite their challenges. Similarly, the Centre for Inclusive Education in Uganda found some best practices and achievements in the special units of Uganda (CIE, 2018). While the existence of such units can help countries in supporting students with special needs, Ainscow, (2020); UNESCO, (2013) and UNICEF, (2023) emphasize that there is a need for more inclusive approaches. These inclusive approaches may include turning the special units into learning support bases for inclusion when they will be used to support all students. The data have shown that very few children have been shifted from the units into the regular classrooms. This tendency is also reported in Tanzania's mainland, where only a few pupils from the special units were included in the mainstream classes (Krohn-Nydal, 2008). Reflecting on the inclusivity of special units, Banks and McCoy (2017) maintain that these units can support inclusion only if used for learners with severe or profound disabilities. Otherwise, they can be a place of segregating children with disabilities from their peers without disabilities. Thus, these units can be valuable resources when they are used in the right way. Apart from using them as classrooms, they can be used to keep child-focused teaching materials and equipment, for temporary support for small groups or individuals who need some support, for training on how to make the curriculum accessible, for parent support, and for any other activities that promote inclusion. However, they should not be used as permanent and separate classrooms for children with disabilities and learning difficulties, as this can be just another form of segregation (UNESCO, 1994). The special units may also serve as resource centers for mainstream schools. The resource centers may support teachers who need support in implementing inclusion. In China, Poon-McBrayer et al. (2016) reported positive responses from teachers and students as part of the "learning in a regular classroom" (LRC) initiative which is a rights-based paradigm shift towards inclusive education.

The special units are envisaged to develop a new purpose, acting as resource rooms or learning support bases to support the specialist needs of learners and any other learners who may need support in the mainstream settings. In addition, the learning support bases may be used for:

- production and adaptation of resources, (e.g., large print, tactile diagrams, specific math's equipment, and picture/word cards),

- assessing learners' individual needs,

- planning, creating target sheets and IEPs,

- one-to-one support lessons to underpin classroom learning.

- teacher training for inclusive strategies

- meetings with parents/guardians/caregivers

The units may also ease the transition from the special units into mainstream classrooms (Lupart et al., 2002; Petriwskyj, 2014). However, the data show that given the situation concerning the staff capacity, the envisaged changing role of the special units to support the diverse needs of learners cannot be realized without upgrading and improving the skills and knowledge of the staff in the units.

Educating learners in an inclusive setting may require additional support from special units in the early stages of implementing a more inclusive education system. However, learners should not spend all their time in special units. They should divide their time between the unit and a regular classroom with their peers, and the aim should be for them to move permanently from the unit into the regular classroom. A study by Majeed et al. (2018) found that providing teaching and learning materials for children with special educational needs is inadequate. While only 7.6% of the schools that enrol children with disabilities have appropriate materials for such children, only 2.5% of the children with visual impairments have any material for children with hearing impairments (Majeed et al., 2018). In Ireland, Banks and McCoy (2018) observed that the special units or special classes experience a paradigm shift from classes for learners with mild disabilities towards more specialized classes accommodating learners with more severe needs. There is a need for further research on the special units' provision regarding their operation and effectiveness in promoting inclusion.

Implications for Future Research

The present study has revealed several benefits and challenges facing the special units and hence they are the challenges facing students with disabilities (Moyi, 2012). The findings have important implications for the need for further research on how to improve learning outcomes among students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Francisco et al., 2020). The study findings also highlight the importance of reforms in using special education units to suit policy changes toward inclusive education. The findings and recommendations will be part of a dialogue to improve the provision and delivery of quality and equitable, inclusive education

services in Zanzibar. We recommend that as Zanzibar is dedicated to implementing inclusive education, the special units be given a new role of being used as resource rooms or learning support bases for all students who may have additional learning support needs. Although data have shown that some steps have started to be taken towards this aim, there is a need to ensure that all these units are closely supported towards inclusive transition. All schools aiming to implement inclusive education should have such rooms (Mulat et al., 2018; Kizir, 2020), unlike the present situation where only eight schools (out of more than 1000 schools) have these rooms in the town areas. Almost all the nine special units are in schools close to the major towns in Zanzibar. The rooms should not be only for children with disabilities as they currently are. Nor should they be used as self-contained classrooms. In a self-contained model, students with disabilities receive all or most of their classroom instruction from special education teachers in the special unit. In a resource room or learning support base model, learners with additional learning support needs (not just those with disabilities) leave their general education classes for a designated time to visit the resource rooms and receive specialized instruction and support in reading, writing, and mathematics. The resource model is often called a "pull-out" model, indicating that students with special educational needs are pulled out of the general education class for special education instruction. Thus, these rooms could also be used as preparatory classes whereby students from these rooms can be shifted permanently to the general education classes. Also, it is worth considering having each new school under construction allocate a room (or rooms) to be used as a learning support base to cater to all students' needs as advocated under inclusive education. Literature has shown more benefits for students with disabilities when they are educated in inclusive settings rather than in segregated settings (Somma, 2020; Krämer & Zimmermann, 2021). Roldán et al. (2021) found that inclusive education not only benefits the most vulnerable students (such as students with disabilities and other SENs) but can also benefit all students when interactions and dialogue are promoted in contexts of diversity.) Also, Vaughn et al. (1998) found that students with disabilities appreciated the inclusion classroom for better social opportunities, like making friends.

Similarly, it is worth requesting the MoEVT to develop inclusive education guidelines on how children placed in special units will be moved into mainstream classes for set periods or permanently as appropriate. In addition, it should be explicitly stated in the guidelines, within

the child's education plan, how each child, in accordance with their learning needs and abilities, will access learning opportunities in the special units and inclusive classes in the school.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities and/or special educational needs may need to attend a school other than their "neighbourhood school" because the special units are very few, and almost all of them are in urban areas. This poses a challenge for other children with disabilities who may need the support of special education teachers. It is mainly a challenge because a child with a disability may come from an area with no inclusive school or a school with a self-contained classroom. It was unclear from the IELS Unit officers whether they planned to put more such units in the rural schools.

Special education teachers need training on how to plan to help with the transition from the special units to the mainstream classrooms. This needs the involvement of the IEP teams. Thus, special education teachers need retraining on how to create an IEP and an IEP team. IELS Unit can use the existing structure of the teacher center (TC) advisors to provide in-service training to the teachers in the special units. The advisors may also support the IELS Unit by providing technical support to the staff in the schools with special units.

IELS Unit may consider having a staff member who closely follows up on the special units. This will help to provide timely support to the special units. Training and refresher courses are also essential for the special unit teachers. Systematic and regular monitoring and evaluation are also things to be considered. It is also crucial for the Ministry responsible for education to consider having such resource rooms in rural schools implementing inclusive education, as most of the units are in urban/semi-urban areas. Special education units need to be reformed so that they work as hubs to support the implementation of inclusive education in schools. The special units can be restructured to be compatible with notions of inclusive education. Changing the name to learning support bases/ resource rooms is also worth contemplating.

To improve the learning of all students, a strong collaboration between the staff of the special units and those from the mainstream classrooms is necessary. Co-teaching could be one of the strategies that may improve a situation where special education teachers work together with general education teachers in the school (Rytivaara, 2012; Lehtonen et al., 2017). Likewise, the school quality assurance officers need to be updated from time to time on inclusive education

developments and practices to enhance their competence in supporting and giving advice to the special education unit teachers (Mapunda et al., 2017).

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